

A Psychoanalytic Study of Anxiety and Defense Mechanisms in Arthur Schnitzler's *The Death of a Bachelor*

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Abstract

This paper explores the manifestations of anxiety and corresponding defense mechanisms in Arthur Schnitzler's short story *The Death of a Bachelor* (2002), which revolves around the confessions of a dying bachelor to his friends. Schnitzler, the Austrian author and contemporary of Freud, was strongly influenced by the emerging field of psychoanalysis, a reflection of which can be seen in his works, where he artfully explores the human psyche. Using Freudian theory, particularly the id, ego, and superego, this qualitative study closely examines the dialogues, thoughts, and actions of the characters. The findings suggest that the bachelor experiences moral anxiety stemming from his infidelity with his friends' wives and he primarily relies on denial as an ego defense mechanism. His friends—the doctor, the writer, and the businessman—seem to experience signal anxiety, which leads them to resort to various defense mechanisms, including denial, rationalization, fantasy, repression, displacement, and splitting. Although each character utilizes a unique set of defense mechanisms, denial and rationalization are most prominent. These findings highlight the pervasive influence of psychological defense mechanisms on the characters' decision-making, ultimately leading the doctor and the writer to choose not to confront their wives.

Keywords: Freud, psychoanalysis, Arthur Schnitzler, anxiety, defense mechanism

Introduction

While Sigmund Freud is recognized as the founder of psychoanalytic theory, it's his contemporary, the Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler, who intricately and intuitively manifests some of his theories in literature. Freud admired Schnitzler, referring to him as his "double" in a letter he wrote to the writer. In addition, Schnitzler was among the first authors to introduce the stream of consciousness technique to German literature. Both qualities make his work valuable case studies in examining the complexities of the human psyche, as exemplified in *The Death of a Bachelor* (2002).

The Death of a Bachelor from the collection *Night Games and Other Stories and Novellas* (2002), is a story of betrayal and promiscuity with an unforeseen ending. Three men—a doctor, a businessman, and a writer—are summoned to the deathbed of their friend, the bachelor. The rich and ailing bachelor has left them all a letter, written nine years earlier, to be read after his death. In the letter, the bachelor confesses to having had an affair with the wives of these three men. After reading the letter, none of these men, except for the widowed businessman, seem inclined to confront their wives on this issue; each coming up with a different excuse. The writer accuses the dead man of being mean-spirited and imagines keeping this letter so that one day, after his death, his wife might read it and say: "You noble man... you magnanimous soul..." (p. 201). The doctor, who has also had his own share of infidelity, doesn't wish to ruin his family by unveiling this truth, and the businessman is uncertain how to respond since his wife died a year ago. These unnamed men seem to share values that compel them to hide this secret and continue their lives as before. However, Arthur Schnitzler leaves the deeper motivations for their behavior to the reader's interpretation.

Schnitzler often addresses themes of love and death in his works with an interest in the psychology of the relationships between men and women. In her essay titled "Behind *Traumnovelle* and *Eyes Wide Shut*: Representation of Women as Passive Subjects and Freud's Uncanny Feeling from 'The Uncanny'", Georgina Farré Merlos (2024) offers a Freudian analysis of the portrayal of women in Schnitzler's well-known novel *Traumnovelle* (Schnitzler, 1926), where Fridolin, a doctor, betrays his wife following their discussions over their sexual fantasies. The frequent appearance of doctors in Schnitzler's works is noteworthy, this is significant not merely because of their recurring presence, but because Schnitzler himself also studied medicine. Lovorka Ivanka Fabek (1985) provides an analysis of the characterization of several doctors in Schnitzler's works.

Despite the huge amount of scholarly attention surrounding the literary works of Arthur Schnitzler, *The Death of a Bachelor* has received relatively little scrutiny. This gap provides an excellent opportunity for exploring the psychoanalytic aspects of the narrative, with regard to the notions of anxiety and defense mechanisms.

Cambridge Online Dictionary (n.d.) describes anxiety as "an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that is happening or might happen in the future." However, for Sigmund Freud, anxiety is a more complicated phenomenon. It is a universal experience, and since literature often mirrors human nature, it also portrays the inner conflicts and tensions human beings face when experiencing difficulties, as well as the defense mechanisms used to cope with them. For example, in the short story "Jilting of Granny Weatherall" (Katherine Anne Porter, 1930), the sick and elderly woman's denial of her appalling condition until her death is a classic illustration of one of the defense mechanisms proposed by Freud that has become an everlasting theme in literature: denial.

In this paper, Freudian psychoanalytic theory of anxiety and defense mechanisms is applied to the short story *The Death of a Bachelor* (2002), as translated by Margaret Schaefer. The present study aims to analyze why the characters in the story behave in ways that surprise most readers, focusing on the different anxieties they experience and the variety of defense mechanisms they use to cope. Moreover, this research emphasizes the importance of such coping mechanisms both in literature and life, while showcasing the relevance of Freudian psychoanalysis to the literary criticism of Arthur Schnitzler's works.

Theoretical framework

Before discussing the relevant concepts of anxiety and defense mechanisms, it's crucial to first explore the fundamental aspects of Freudian theories, which include his models of the psyche: the topographical model and the structural model. Freud first proposed the topographical model (Freud, 1915), which often uses the analogy of an iceberg to describe the three layers of the psyche: the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious. The conscious is explained by Freud as all the mental processes we are actively aware of, and this would be the very tip of the iceberg. The preconscious mind consists of thoughts or feelings that a person is not presently aware of, but that can be brought up to consciousness easily, like a loved one's phone number. The largest and most influential part of the iceberg is the unconscious which according to Freud (1915) holds all our repressed feelings, desires, impulses, images and thoughts. Although these unconscious desires and feelings are hidden from conscious awareness, they significantly influence our behavior and judgments. Later on, Freud proposed yet another model known as the structural or tripartite model, in which the psyche is structured into three parts: the id, ego and superego (Freud, 1923). The id is the irrational and primitive personality component that seeks instant satisfaction, regardless of the consequences. While id urges us to do anything that feels good and brings pleasure, superego is the ethical component of our personality that incorporates values that are learned by an individual from parents and society; it acts like a judge and is basically what we presume as conscience. Ego is the part that mediates between id and superego. One analogy Freud makes is that of the id being a horse while the ego is the rider, "like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse" (Freud, 1923, p.15). Ideally, the ego is rational and realistic and is looking for better ways to gain pleasure without causing harm.

It's important to note that Freud's theory of anxiety didn't remain static throughout his career and was often refined by the psychoanalyst. His understanding of anxiety began as a focus on repressed desires causing anxiety, which later evolved to his consideration of ego as the main cause of anxiety (Freud, 1926). In the 1920's Freud perceived anxiety as a result of the ego's failure to manage the conflicting demands of the id and the superego; therefore, anxiety is a signal that the ego is being overwhelmed. He also believed that anxiety could be triggered by external events and internal conflicts. At this stage, Freud identified three types of anxiety: moral anxiety, realistic anxiety, and neurotic anxiety. Realistic anxiety stems from actual external threatening conditions, while neurotic anxiety is a result of the conflict between ego and id, the threat being the fulfillment of an unacceptable id impulse by the individual. Moral anxiety is a consequence of a conflict between ego and superego; this kind of anxiety can be experienced when someone fails to act upon an internalized or societal moral norm.

We are warned by a proverb against serving two masters at the same time. The poor ego has things even worse: it serves three severe masters and does what it can to bring their claims and demands into harmony with one another. These claims are always divergent and often seem incompatible. No wonder that the ego so often fails in its task. Its three tyrannical masters are the external world, the superego and the id. ... Thus, the ego driven by the id, confined by the superego, repulsed by reality, struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it; and we can understand why ... we cannot suppress a cry; 'life is not easy.' If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety - realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the superego and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id. (Freud, 1933, pp. 97-98)

As Freud's theories developed, he introduced yet another kind of anxiety in his more mature work, particularly in *Inhibitions, symptoms, and anxiety* (1926): signal anxiety. Freud makes a distinction between primary automatic anxiety, which is strongly but not exclusively associated with infancy, and that of signal anxiety. Unlike moral, neurotic, and realistic anxieties, which arise from conflicts in the psyche, signal anxiety is the response of the ego to the threat or potential of a traumatic situation. By anticipating external or internal threats, the ego triggers anxiety as a signal to activate defense mechanisms and prevent further distress.

Freud (1894) has been among the first people to study and postulate defense mechanisms such as regression and repression; however, his daughter Anna Freud (1936) developed and elaborated on his ideas while proposing new defense mechanisms she had noted. Freud believed these mechanisms were unconscious processes used by individuals to protect themselves in the face of anxiety, which varies based on one's personality, childhood experiences, and the type of anxiety they are experiencing. We shall not expect two different people in the same situation to employ the

same defense mechanisms. As Freud puts it, employing defense mechanisms is a natural part of psychological development that helps individuals to survive through the unbearable anxiety they are experiencing and primarily protects the ego from overwhelm. However, defense mechanisms might prevent individuals from a deeper understanding of their situation. Some defense mechanisms are quite primitive and immature, like denial. The distortion or denial of reality might offer immediate relief, but will not offer much long-term assistance. The effectiveness and functionality of defense mechanisms depend on how, when, and to what extent they are employed. Here a number of these mechanisms are mentioned:

Denial: Denial was first conceptualized by Freud as refusing to accept or admit an unpleasant or unacceptable aspect of reality. It was Anna Freud (1936) who seriously studied the matter.

Repression: This is an unconscious defense mechanism employed to keep unbearable thoughts unconscious. It would manifest itself as not remembering an unpleasant situation or person, etc. (Boeree, 2017)

Displacement: It's basically when one redirects emotions and impulses, usually aggressive ones, from one object to another less threatening object. One well-known example of this defense mechanism is when an employee frustrated by his boss can't express this to him but takes it out on his child or spouse. (Boeree, 2017)

Rationalization: As the name suggests, this defense mechanism involves the act of justifying behaviors and events that are anxiety-provoking and unacceptable. (Boeree, 2017)

Splitting: This primitive defense mechanism is also known as "all-or-nothing thinking" and "black-and-white" thinking. Melanie Klein (1935) developed this understanding of splitting from Freud's view on the subject. When experiencing intolerable internal and emotional conflicts, individuals might tend to polarize the world and view themselves or others as either good or bad, negative or positive, but not to accept an integration of the opposing qualities, in order to simplify complicated situations and reduce anxiety.

Fantasy: An individual utilizing this defense mechanism involves in creating imaginary scenarios, situations, or in some cases, an imaginary world to cope with anxiety. Otto Fenichel describes this as "small regressions and compensatory wish fulfillments which are recuperative in effect" (1945, p. 554).

Thus, the following discussion explores the reflection of anxiety and defense mechanisms experienced by the characters in Schnitzler's short story *The Death of a Bachelor*, through the lens of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

Discussion

The Death of a Bachelor (2002) narrates the story of three men summoned to the deathbed of their friend, only to receive a letter in which the deceased bachelor admits to having an affair with all three men's wives. Schnitzler has skillfully portrayed the characters' mental conflict in relation to the shocking truth. It is a confusing letter in which the bachelor has stated he doesn't know why he is writing it, but feels this strange compulsion to do so while he is aware this might hurt his friends. He ruminates on the reason behind his confession while mentioning he is not remorseful as those affairs were only in his fate:

And I ask myself what kind of strange mood is now driving me to my desk and pushing me to write down words whose effects on you I will no longer be able to see?... could it not after all stem from a deep and at bottom noble wish not to leave the world with too many lies? I could make myself believe that, if I had ever felt even once the slightest hint of what men call 'remorse'... It was fate, my friends, and I can't change it. I have possessed all your women. All. (p. 196)

Regarding the anxiety and defense mechanisms, the letter can be perceived as a manifestation of moral anxiety the bachelor experienced. It shall be noticed that the conscious awareness of the so-called feeling of "remorse" is significantly different from the unconscious conflict between ego and superego. Superego indicates loudly and clearly something wrong has been done, something against social or familial norms internalized during early childhood; at

this point, ego, also unconsciously, starts seeking a way to cope. This seems to be the reason the bachelor can't address why he is writing this letter, but still feels the strong urge to admit to what he calls "monstrous pettiness" (p. 196). Writing a letter to be read after his death without confronting those men while alive refers to some level of understanding of the fact that his actions weren't that petty after all. The use of the classic defense mechanism of denial becomes evident when he refers to this series of affairs he has actively participated in as 'fate.' The denial of responsibility is a recurring distortion of truth in this story.

While reading the letter, all three men present in the room are left bewildered and uneasy. The writer, who was initially reading the letter aloud, suddenly stops, feeling "a kind of paralysis creep into his fingers" (p. 196). Once the letter is fully read, the doctor takes it from the businessman to reread it carefully. Beyond physical and apparent signs of anxiety, Schnitzler takes the reader to the characters' minds, where their thoughts and reactions are best described by signal anxiety, since their marriage, family and self-image are threatened. By anticipating future distress, the ego calls for defense mechanisms to prevent further psychological turmoil and potential trauma. The doctor, while staring at the letter, starts to think about his kind wife and amazing children and states that he finds this information "not so much untrue as mysteriously, even exaltedly, irrelevant." (p. 198). He employs the defense mechanism of rationalization by assuming his wife must have betrayed him when he left home years ago for a short while due to a problem with his career, during which time he had also strayed.

Moreover, the doctor begins to recall a distant time when his wife had subtly mentioned something related to this betrayal; however, he can't remember what she had said and when she said it. This indicates that the doctor might have repressed what he had heard and felt, as even now that the memory is triggered, he can't recall what exactly his wife told him, although it's not a trivial matter. Not being able to recall a painful memory or event might well be a sign of a defense mechanism known as repression:

...and it was clear to him that he had really always known it. Wasn't she once near to telling him about it? Didn't she drop hints? Thirteen or fourteen years ago... on what occasion...? ... in vain he tried to remember the faded words. (pp. 198-199)

It becomes apparent towards the end of the story that the doctor will not confront his wife on the matter.

The writer's mental conflict follows. He starts by recalling his own affairs, considering them "adventures from recent and from more distant times that he could hardly have avoided in his successful artist's life" (pp. 197-198). This also reflects moral anxiety and how the character minimizes his violation of societal and internalized moral norms by rationalizing his affairs, saying they were an unavoidable part of his life as a famed artist. Furthermore, he takes his wrongdoings as a basis for denying and rationalizing the betrayal of his wife, saying it must have been a plan devised by the bachelor and that the woman most probably gave in without consideration. He even considers the possibility that the letter might be a lie.

Besides the denial of his wife's responsibility and the utter rationalization of her infidelity, another defense mechanism is employed, that of displacement, when the anger and frustration the character feels are directed towards an object that isn't threatening at this point: the deceased bachelor. The writer calls him pathetic and scoundrel, passing the whole buck to him:

It appeared to him not impossible that the old bachelor in his meanness had attempted nothing less than to rob him, his secretly envied friend, of his companion. ... his wife had thrown herself into the arms of an unworthy man, perhaps without consideration, without thought... perhaps in the end it was a lie after all, everything written in the testament? Perhaps a pathetic ordinary man who knew he was condemned to be eternally forgotten had taken his last revenge on the chosen man over whose works death had no power (pp. 197-198).

Consequently, the ego successfully prevents further turmoil, and the writer, like the doctor, chooses not to confront his wife on the matter. However, he needs to resort to yet another defense mechanism, named fantasy, to calm himself. He keeps the letter to himself, imagining his wife would find the letter after his death and praise him for his dignity: "... he could already hear her whisper at his grave: 'You noble man... you magnanimous soul...'" (p. 201)

The businessman's case is rather different in that his wife died a year ago. Nevertheless, he struggles to make his head around this new piece of information. His perception of his marriage and spouse is broken down. He remembers the woman in different circumstances: as a young bride, an emotionally distant companion, a nervous woman, a mother, a passionate lady and at last remembering her as she was very sick, awaiting death. He feels obliged to choose between these images, based on which he could draw a conclusion and feel in a specific way about her and the life they've had together: "He felt as though he had to choose one of the images to arrive at some nameless feeling, because right now free-floating anger and shame were scanning a void." (p. 199)

The division of people or situations into 'all good' or 'all bad' is a sign of the defense mechanism named splitting. Businessman's inability to integrate all these pictures of his wife into a cohesive whole, and the difficulty of tolerating different, rather opposing emotions towards her compels him to hang on to the unconscious defense mechanism of splitting. This makes it much easier for the businessman to manage unbearably frustrating emotions by seeing his wife either as a great lady or a devalued woman.

Although defense mechanisms help individuals to cope during incredibly difficult situations, they might not be the ultimate solution. As observed throughout this short story, each mechanism seems to distort reality and offer escape in one way or another.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it's noted that the four main characters of the short story *The Death of a Bachelor* (2002), namely the bachelor, the writer, the doctor, and the businessman, deal with different types of anxieties, and they utilize various defense mechanisms to deal with them. It has been skillfully portrayed in this story that individuals put to use different defense mechanisms based on their life experiences, how they perceive the situation, and the type of anxiety they are feeling. It's interpreted that the deceased bachelor was experiencing moral anxiety, a conflict imposed by the superego on the ego, to which the ego mostly responded by the defense mechanism of denial. The three married men use a range of these mechanisms, namely fantasy, denial, rationalization, repression, displacement and splitting, in response to the signal anxiety they experience. Whether or not to confront their wives and how to deal with the newly received information that can shatter not only their lives but the image they have of their spouse, their marriage are reasonable sources of distress. At the end of the story, the doctor and the writer choose not to say anything to their wives and the businessman, whose wife died a year ago, is attempting to reach a single definite feeling towards her, a sign of the defense mechanism that is called splitting. These findings further reinforce the relation between Freudian psychoanalysis and the works of Arthur Schnitzler. In addition, the findings underscore the significant role of unconscious defense mechanisms in one's decisions and perception of reality.

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